

Field Report

Valley Forge National Historical Park

■ 1.0 Summary

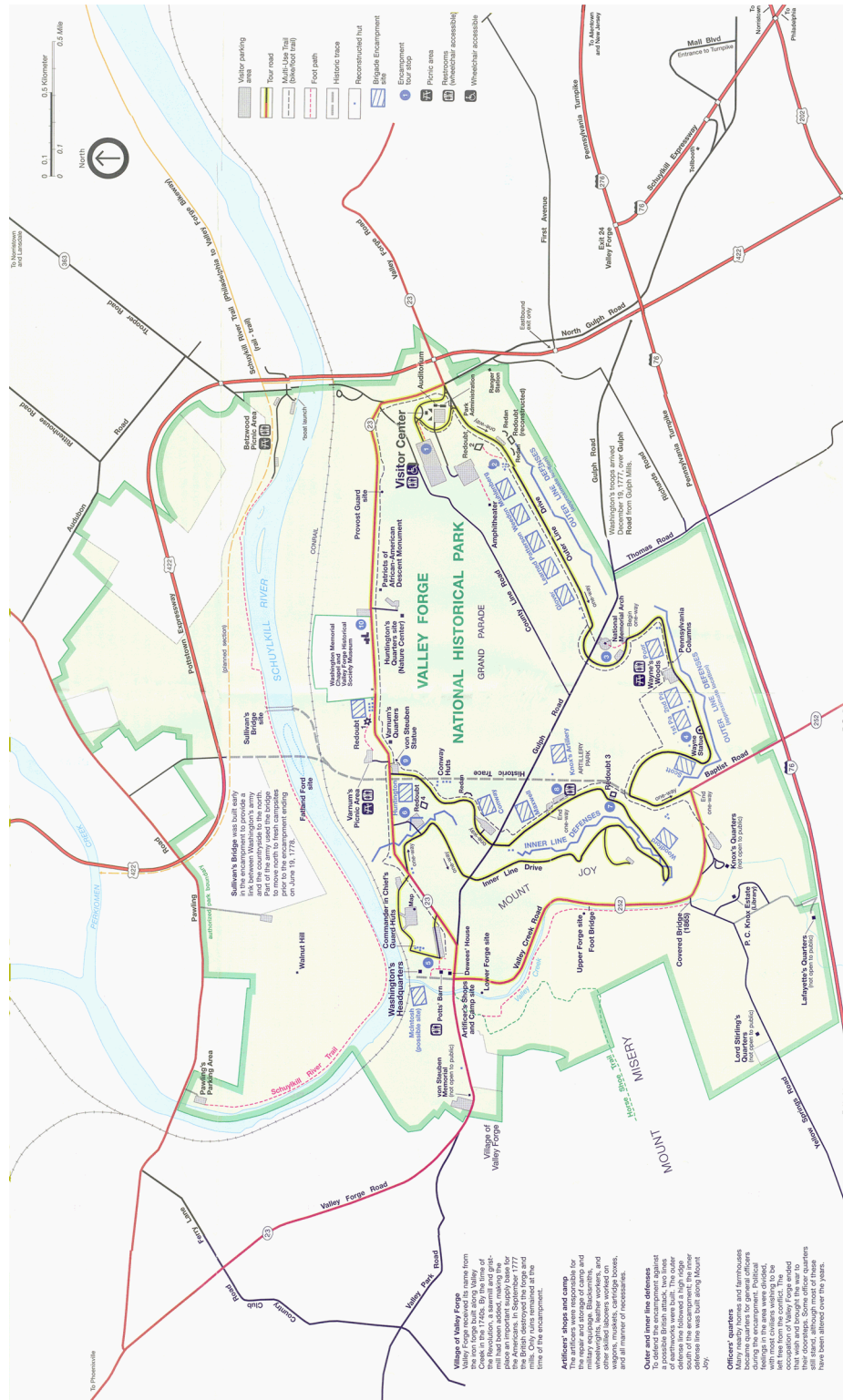
Valley Forge National Historical Park (NHP) was established to “preserve and commemorate for the people of the United States the area associated with the heroic suffering, hardship, and determination and resolve of General George Washington’s Continental Army during the winter of 1777–1778 at Valley Forge (Public Law 94-337, July 4, 1976). Valley Forge NHP is a strong candidate for Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS). The park’s location just 20 miles from a major city (Philadelphia), the presence of a rail line within the park that is being developed as a light-rail transit line, and the sheer volume of traffic through and around this historically significant park are all contributing factors to this need. Existing ATS to the park are inadequate to dramatically influence personal travel. The park’s ongoing planning includes consideration of closing certain roads to private vehicles and limiting access to authorized tour vehicles in conjunction with a new Visitor Center. Improving tour bus circulation in conjunction with the Visitor Center is a long-term concept. Providing linkages to the Schuylkill Valley Metro is a medium-term alternative, as that project is proceeding. When built, a connection between Port Kennedy station and the park will be needed. In addition, bicycle-related improvements seem quite compatible with park operations. As a result of the presence of the shared-use paths within the park and the Schuylkill River trail, there is a clear demand for cycling. Improving facilities and offering area visitors an alternative to driving would likely result in even more users and could remove some auto trips from park roads.

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

Valley Forge NHP is located in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, in the Township of Valley Forge, which is approximately 20 miles northeast of Philadelphia. The park is the site of the winter encampment of the Continental Army of 1777–1778. Valley Forge represents the birthplace of a unified professional military organization that ultimately enabled George Washington and his men to triumph over the British. The park encompasses over 3,000 acres that include picnic areas, monuments, furnished historic buildings and several museums (see Figure 1 for location and basic physical configuration).

Figure 1. Valley Forge National Historical Park



2.2 Administration and Classification

Valley Forge is a NHP. The superintendent is Arthur Stewart.

2.3 Physical Description

Valley Forge NHP is situated on 3,466 acres on both sides of the Schuylkill River. Almost all of the public facilities are located south of the river. On the north side, public facilities include a picnic area and the trailhead of a multi-use bicycle trail. The park features considerable open space, as the fields that were used by the Continental Army for training and encampment are preserved. The park is also surrounded by development, both commercial and residential property and major transportation facilities.

The key characteristics related to transportation are:

- The park is not self-contained. Two Pennsylvania State Routes (23 and 252) travel through the park, and while both of these roads have been around since the encampment period, their use has evolved into key commuting and truck routes. Traffic on these roads is heavy at times, which can detract from the visitor experience.
- The park offers visitors the opportunity to tour the park by automobile, providing a 10-stop encampment tour via Outer Line Drive and Inner Line Drive as well as Valley Forge Road (Pennsylvania Route 23).
- On a broader scale, the park is very close to the nexus of several major transportation facilities, including the Pennsylvania Turnpike (I-76/I-276), the Schuylkill Expressway (I-76), U.S. Route 422, and U.S. Route 202. Further, the presence of these highways has facilitated considerable development around the park. The second largest retail mall in the United States, the King of Prussia Mall, is located one mile from the park. Montgomery County, in which most of the park is situated, has been identified by regional planners as one the key economic centers of Pennsylvania, along with Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Traffic congestion is a significant regionwide problem.
- The park itself is served by two bus routes, both operated by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA). Route 125 provides hourly service between Center City Philadelphia and Valley Forge NHP. In addition, Route 99 passes near the park and provides connections to the Norristown Transportation Center, the nearest light-rail line to the park.
- In addition to the scheduled bus routes, a seasonal tour bus service is offered within the park and is operated by Valley Forge Tours, a concessionaire.
- The park is a major regional recreational resource. Jogging, walking, cycling, and related uses are common throughout the park. The Schuylkill River Trail is a rail trail that runs from Philadelphia to the park; this will be extended in the future. Horses are permitted on the Horse Shoe Trail, which is accessed via a parking lot that accommodates horse trailers by encampment stop #5, near Washington's Headquarters. At

present, there are no facilities in place to assist riders in crossing Route 23 to access the trail head.

Figure 2. National Memorial Arch



2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Historical Park

Valley Forge National Historical Park (NHP) was established to “preserve and commemorate for the people of the United States the area associated with the heroic suffering, hardship, and determination and resolve of General George Washington’s Continental Army during the winter of 1777–1778 at Valley Forge (Public Law 94-337, July 4, 1976). The park’s General Management Plan (GMP), prepared in 1982, describes “commemoration” as including: 1) appropriate ceremonies and observances; 2) monumentation and memorialization; 3) information and interpretation; and 4) opportunities “to sense on the ground the presence of the encampment.”

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

Valley Forge NHP accommodates approximately 1.7 million recreational visitors per year, about 75 percent of whom visit between April and October. Most of these visits are for recreational purposes, with about 250,000 visitors coming for educational purposes. A 1986 survey of visitors in the summer months indicated high usage by family groups and

also by solitary visitors (walkers, cyclists, joggers). About one-fourth of the visitors come to the park on a once weekly basis. The survey also indicated that the majority of the visitors were from Pennsylvania, and most of these were from metropolitan Philadelphia.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Valley Forge NHP, because of its history, is a very important cultural and historical resource. Because the communities surrounding the park have expanded in recent years without providing adequate open space, the park has also become an important recreational resource for local residents. It is important to note, however, that although the history of Valley Forge dates to 1777 as a cultural resource, the park was created first by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1878, and designated a national park site in 1976. Although the park has long been supported by a very active historical society, the area surrounding the park was not protected from adjacent development. Examples of how this lack of protection impacts the visitor experience can be found along Outer Line Drive, where one can see and hear the Pennsylvania Turnpike; along Valley Creek, where stream bank erosion and sedimentation due to stormwater runoff have jeopardized the creek; and difficulty visitors can have finding the park due to the myriad regional highways.

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The transportation issues and concerns can be summarized as follows:

- Heavy commuter traffic during morning and evening hours on Routes 23 and 252 disrupt accessibility to the park and impact the visitor experience;
- Plans by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) to implement major roadway improvements on roads that traverse the park;
- Parking demand at several locations around the park is in excess of supply;
- Desire to expand access to bicycles, with bicycle rental concession and bicycle lanes on widened roadways;
- Desire to redevelop the shuttle service originating and ending in the Visitor Center; and
- Proposed Schuylkill Valley Metro extension from Philadelphia to Pottsville with one or two stations in proximity to the park.

Regional Traffic

The park is located near an important access point to U.S. Route 422, which feeds traffic into the other regional highways. Given the presence of the Schuylkill River, motorists traveling to the highway network from the west of Valley Forge and south of the river, must travel

through the park on Pennsylvania Route 23, a two-lane road. On a typical day, more than 2,800 cars pass through the park on Pennsylvania Route 23 during the morning and afternoon peak hours combined.

Roadway Improvement Plans

The two sides of Valley Forge NHP are connected by a single river crossing, U.S. Route 422. Previously, a second crossing (Betzwood Bridge) existed, but this bridge became unsafe and was dismantled. PennDOT has designed a replacement bridge facility and is moving forward with its project. There is considerable concern, however, among park personnel that the opening of this replacement bridge will have an undue impact on the park. Given that river crossings are limited, the opening of the new Betzwood Bridge will undoubtedly increase traffic on Route 23. The park is currently working with PennDOT to achieve a design solution that is mutually acceptable.

Parking

Although there are ample places to park throughout the park, there are locations where parking is in short supply. These include the following:

- **Betzwood Picnic Area** – As the current endpoint of the Schuylkill River Trail to Philadelphia, the facility fills up everyday.
- **P.C. Knox Estate/Library/Meeting Room** – More spaces are needed beyond the small four-space parking area during meetings and room events.
- **Varnum's Picnic Area** – which is served by two lots, one on each sides of Pennsylvania Route 23, and demand often exceeds supply.

Bicycling

Within Valley Forge NHP, there are 12 miles of designated multi-purpose trails, of which six miles are paved. The trails were originally designed by PennDOT as bicycle trails, but were converted to multi-use trails with two four-foot lanes. Although it would be highly desirable to widen the current trails to at least 10 feet, the width recommended in design guides, this is not possible because of the risk of impacts to potential archeological resources. Because the park is bicycle-friendly, and because the Schuylkill River Trail passes through the park, the park has attempted to offer bicycles for rent. A concession was tried in the past but failed, possibly due to the hilly terrain throughout the park, the long distances required to traverse the park, and problems of liability.

Plans to improve bicycle access to and within the park include the potential for widening Pennsylvania Route 23 to better accommodate bicycles. Other facilities include a concession on the outside edge of the park, located at the site of a potential station for the proposed Schuylkill Valley Metro extension (see below).

Information Systems

Most of the regional highways indicate which exit to use to reach Valley Forge, but since so many highways come together, it is often difficult to find ones way to the park, especially when the signed exit leads the motorist to another highway. Staff at Valley Forge have indicated a desire to improve signage to guide motorists to the park entrance. Since most of the roads are under the jurisdiction of PennDOT, staff from each organization must collaborate to improve signage. This could include the use of variable message signs to convey the sequence of exits to follow to get to the proper roadway.

Shuttle Services

At present, an existing shuttle bus provides limited access for park visitors as an alternative to driving. The bus takes passengers between the Visitor Center and the site of George Washington's Headquarters while a tape cassette discussing the history of the park is played. Ridership on this shuttle is hampered by the fact that Valley Forge is currently set up as a car-friendly park and visitors can purchase the same cassette and play it in their own cars. Current park planning includes the potential for a complete revamping of how visitors tour the park.

Figure 3. Valley Forge Tour Bus



Regional Transit Connections

In addition to the existing bus services in the area, SEPTA, in conjunction with its counterpart transit agency in Reading, Pennsylvania, are studying the feasibility of a Schuylkill Valley Metro Line, a 62-mile light-rail line between Reading and Philadelphia. This rail line would pass through the park. A new station would be constructed at Port Kennedy, less than one mile from the park and would give travelers a viable rail alternative to access the park from the proposed rail line. It is reasonable to expect that a transit link between Port Kennedy and the park will be needed as the line is developed.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The area around the park is fairly well developed, but there are projects still under development such as a proposed industrial park on the north side of the proposed Betzwood Bridge. Further, as regional development migrates to the west there are concerns about increased traffic through the park. Current coordination is with township and county governments.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The cultural resources of the park, which include Washington's Headquarters, historic structures, remnants of original fortifications, monuments, landscapes, an extensive curatorial collection, and unknown archeological resources, help to commemorate an imperishable chapter in the history of America's struggle for independence. Natural resources are an integral part of the cultural landscape of Valley Forge. Protection and enhancement of natural systems are necessary to achieve the park's mission – to preserve and commemorate the site of the 1777-1778 winter encampment [NPS, Long-Range Interpretive Plan, Valley Forge NHP (to be determined)]. As mentioned previously, Valley Creek has experienced considerable degradation over the years. As pervious land surfaces are developed within the watershed of Valley Creek, the impact of storm water runoff is another source of concern. In terms of cultural resources, any time construction takes place in the park, there is the risk of destroying archaeological remains, many of which are buried less than two feet below current surface levels.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The park is a major recreational resource for area residents, who walk, jog, and bicycle through the park, hike its trails, and ride horseback. Fishermen use Valley Creek, which is designated as a Class I fishing resource in Pennsylvania. While these uses of the park engender strong park support from residents, the demands and potential impacts of recreational users are not entirely consistent with the park's historical preservation and educational missions.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

The last GMP for the park was prepared in 1982. It is likely that the GMP will be updated in the next several years. The most important plan under consideration today is the construction of a new Visitor Center in partnership with the Valley Forge Historical Society.

The current Visitor Center/museum was built by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, this design is not visitor friendly because the visitor must walk more than 300 yards from the parking lot to the Visitor Center and then must go up a flight of stairs and outside to the auditorium, next door, to see the park orientation film (Statement of Katherine Stevenson, Associate Director, Cultural Resources Stewardship and Partnerships, NPS, before 106th Congress, March 11, 1999).

Figure 4. Existing Below Grade Visitor Center (Parking Lot Behind)



Because the Historical Society must construct a new facility for its substantial permanent collections, the concept of a new Visitor Center will address two needs. It will also enhance the visitor experience, by housing the society's outstanding collection and the park's collection in the same facility, and by developing in a public/private partnership a first-class facility better than either the society or the service might be able to do on its

own. The facility could be appropriately placed within the planned development zone at the entrance of the park.

Legislation is currently under consideration in Congress that would permit the revenues of the proposed museum operation and related activities to offset operating and management expenses. It will allow the Valley Forge Historical Society to charge fees, rent space for events, and sell merchandise and food within the museum building, a structure owned by the NPS and operated jointly by the Valley Forge Historical Society and the NPS.

Potential Changes to Encampment Tour

As mentioned previously, visitors to Valley Forge typically tour the encampment sites by automobile or by the tour bus. The visitor orientation experience is in need of improvement, however, and park personnel, in cooperation with the Historical Society, are discussing long-range modifications to the encampment tour. The concept would better integrate the bus tour with the Visitor Center, creating a seamless system of orientation, exploration, and, by returning visitors to the Visitor Center, give visitors the opportunity to learn more. This concept could include limiting access to certain park roads by private vehicle, which would ultimately lead to considerably more bus ridership.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

There are a number of local, regional, and state agencies with which park staff coordinate on a variety of issues. Although coordination with all of these agencies is desirable, it is not possible to participate in all of the meetings that take place. Recently, the park joined the Greater Valley Forge Transportation Management Association, who facilitate coordination on transportation issues among various agencies.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need and System Options

5.1 Magnitude of Need

The need for an ATS is moderate at the Valley Forge NHP. For the transit-dependent population, access to the park includes a public bus and the planned extension of the metro line from Philadelphia. However, once people get to the park, accessing facilities is a difficult task. An upgraded shuttle bus system, with access to multiple park destinations including a bicycle concession and potential metro station outside of the park would potentially increase non-motorist attendance. However, while Valley Forge NHP provides such a motorist friendly environment, it is not clear whether transit ridership would increase dramatically with improvements, unless park roads were closed to private vehicle traffic.

5.2 Range of Feasible Alternatives

Four non-auto access options have been identified for Valley Forge NHP: 1) an improved bus tour; 2) the proposed Schuylkill Valley Metro; and 3) bicycle improvements.

- The improved bus tour concept is a long-term strategy that is linked to the potential new Visitor Center/museum concept described above.
- Providing linkages to the Schuylkill Valley Metro is a medium-term alternative, as that project is proceeding. When built, a connection between Port Kennedy station and the park will be needed.
- The bicycle-related improvements, described above, seem quite compatible with park operations. As a result of the presence of the shared-use paths within the park and the Schuylkill River trail, there is a clear demand for cycling. Improving facilities and offering area visitors an alternative to driving would likely result in even more users and could remove some auto trips from park roads.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

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■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Arthur Stewart, Superintendent, Valley Forge National Historical Park

Larry Steeler, Assistant Superintendent, Valley Forge National Historical Park

Kate Shemwell, Park Engineer, Valley Forge National Historical Park

E. Scott Kalbach, Chief Ranger, Valley Forge National Historical Park

Paulette Mark, Valley Forge National Historical Park